

**From trusteeship to self-determination:  
L.J. du Plessis' thinking on apartheid and his conflict  
with H.F. Verwoerd**

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L.J. "Wikus" du Plessis (1897–1968), professor of Constitutional Law at Potchefstroom University, wrote to the Executive Council (UR) of the Afrikaner Broederbond on 16 July 1960 announcing his resignation from the organisation. He had been a member of this secret society for almost 37 years and its chairman from 1930 to 1932. His reason for cutting his ties with the very organisation he had helped to make a force to be reckoned with, was a fierce (and in part, public) confrontation with the South African prime minister, Hendrik Verwoerd (1901–1966) about the understanding and implementation of apartheid. Whereas Verwoerd proceeded according to the criteria of political practicability and aimed at the preservation of racial privilege, Du Plessis wanted apartheid to become a social order founded on moral principles. For this reason he demanded that the black population be given realistic economic opportunities. The previous year the same issue had led to Du Plessis' expulsion from the National Party (NP), a party he had served for more than two decades.

Du Plessis' encounter with Verwoerd is a significant but largely neglected episode in the history of the apartheid era. In his doctoral thesis, J. Lazar dealt with Verwoerd's clash with the dissenting intellectuals of the South African Bureau of Racial Affairs (SABRA), but did not include the rift between him and Du Plessis.<sup>1</sup> D. O'Meara, in his publication on the inner workings of the NP power elite, mentioned Du Plessis only briefly.<sup>2</sup> There is only one study, that by P. Potgieter, which focuses on Du Plessis' political thinking.<sup>3</sup> It concentrates for the most part on the 1930s and 1940s when Du Plessis was an influential figure in Afrikaner nationalist circles. Although he became far more isolated in the 1950s, his confrontation with South Africa's prime minister is of great historical interest. On the one hand, it shows the intolerance of the new power elite, but it also reveals the remarkable development of Du Plessis' political views. Once a supporter of the right wing Ossewabrandwag (OB), he now became an advocate for compromise and dialogue with the black majority. This article will also argue that his views were more consistent than his shifting political affiliations might suggest.

This paper will reconstruct the conflict between Du Plessis and Verwoerd, which was far more fundamental than a confrontation between political positions on certain aspects of apartheid. It would be incorrect to judge this clash as the result of

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1. J. Lazar, 'Conformity and Conflict: Afrikaner Nationalist Politics in South Africa, 1948–1961', PhD thesis, Oxford University, 1987.
2. D. O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years: The Apartheid State and the Politics of the National Party, 1948–1994* (Ravan and Ohio University Press, Johannesburg and Athens, 1996), pp 96–97.
3. P.J.J.S. Potgieter, *L.J. du Plessis as Denker oor Staat en Politiek* (Instituut vir die Bevordering van Calvinisme, Potchefstroom, 1976).

differing ideological commitments reaching back to the 1940s. During those years Du Plessis was a member of the OB, an anti-parliamentary, extremely right wing organisation, whereas Verwoerd was its most outspoken adversary as a fierce advocate of NP interests. One should not conclude from this that Du Plessis was a convinced fascist while Verwoerd was a genuine democrat. The conflict between the NP and Ossewabrandwag after the Second World War was not about political principles as Roberts and Trollip suggested in their book written shortly after the Second World War. More recent works have shown that it was primarily a struggle for power in which ideological positions were of less significance.<sup>4</sup>

The conflict between Du Plessis and Verwoerd in the late 1950s was not due to some basic rejection of Potchefstroom intellectuals on Verwoerd's part; he did not despise their increasingly radicalised Calvinism as such. Verwoerd was an irreligious person, notwithstanding his early intention to become a minister of the church. His verbal commitments to God and the Christian church should be understood in the context of his cultural nationalism and should not conceal his agnosticism. He developed a close political relationship with a number of important figures in Potchefstroom, such as Professor Stephanus du Toit,<sup>5</sup> who was the son of the "volk's poet", Totius (theologian J.D. du Toit, one of the most esteemed figures in the Afrikaner cultural nationalist movement). However, no one was closer to Verwoerd than educationist Joon van Rooy. During the decade that Verwoerd served as a member of the UR of the Broederbond (1940–50), Van Rooy was its chairman for eight years. Verwoerd honoured him publicly in an article some years later, describing him as an exemplary nationalist.<sup>6</sup> Verwoerd actively supported the bid by Potchefstroom University College to dissociate itself from its parent institution, the University of South Africa, and to establish itself as an independent and Calvinist university. This commitment was certainly fuelled by the mutual trust between him and Van Rooy<sup>7</sup> and Verwoerd's attendance at the founding ceremony of the new university was due to this liaison; it should not be misinterpreted as his special affinity for Potchefstroom's brand of Calvinism.

### Du Plessis' career

Potchefstroom University College emerged from a theological school and developed a decidedly Calvinist outlook. The most prominent professors were members of the small Gereformeerde Kerk and the fact that Potchefstroom was the regional centre of

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4. This is the main thesis of the influential book by M. Roberts and A.E.G. Trollip, *The South African Opposition 1939–1945: An Essay in Contemporary History* (Longmans, London, 1947). In contrast to this thesis, recent research has emphasised that it was primarily a power struggle for the same constituency. See L.M. Fourie, "Die Ossewa-Brandwag en Afrikanereenheid 1939–1942", D.Litt. thesis, Potchefstroom University, 1987; and C. Marx, *Oxwagon Sentinel: Radical Afrikaner Nationalism and the History of the Ossewabrandwag* (Unisa Press, Pretoria, 2008).
  5. S. du Toit, an NP follower in Potchefstroom, was rather critical of Du Plessis and his column "Loop van die Dinge" in *Koers*. See P.F. van der Schyff, *Wonderdaad...! Die PUK tot 1951: Wording, Vestiging en Selfstandigheid* (Potchefstroom University, Potchefstroom, 2003), p 523.
  6. H.F. Verwoerd, "Joon van Rooy en die Staatkundige Lewe", *Koers*, 22, 2, 1954, pp 93–94.
  7. See the many letters of thanks from Potchefstroom in the University of the Free State Archive for Contemporary History (hereafter AFCH), Verwoerd Collection (hereafter PV93), PV 93/3/1/8. On Verwoerd's role, see Van der Schyff, *Wonderdaad*, pp 597ff., 620–621.

this church in the Transvaal after it was transferred from Burgersdorp to Potchefstroom in 1905, fostered the Calvinist profile of the college. One of these professors was L. J. du Plessis, who had already displayed a wide range of interests as a student and who became active in a number of fields.<sup>8</sup> He wrote of himself: “[I]n origin, intellectual outlook and education, I am an Afrikaner Calvinist; I was, therefore, involved in most Afrikaner movements; but also in co-operations with English speakers and in service to non-whites.”<sup>9</sup> Du Plessis began his studies in Potchefstroom, but went on to attend the Calvinist Vrye Universiteit in Amsterdam from 1919 to 1921.<sup>10</sup> At that time the influence of Abraham Kuyper, who passed away in 1920, was still considerable and his neo-Calvinist social theory of “sphere sovereignty”<sup>11</sup> had a strong impact on Du Plessis and other reformed academics from Potchefstroom.<sup>12</sup> Kuyper also served as a role model in practical politics, but his clear commitment to democracy did not find that many adherents at the small Transvaal university. Although Du Plessis was a classical philologist, he had developed broader intellectual interests and became a professor of constitutional law.<sup>13</sup> More than most of his colleagues at Potchefstroom, he appeared to be a “public intellectual”, analysing and commenting on current politics in the university journal *Koers*, where he had his own regular current affairs column, “Die Loop van die Dinge”.

In his letter of resignation to the Broederbond, Du Plessis wrote about the organisation’s beginnings and his own role in the early years:

You certainly know that our organisation, a mixture of Afrikaner nationalism and free masonry, was in danger of petering out in the early 1920s, when friend Rassie [L.J. Erasmus?] came from the Rand to look for an infusion of Calvinist blood in Potchefstroom. The first Potchefstroom members were my brother-in-law, Frans du Toit and me; we were admitted into the organisation by a friend, Klopper, on the Johannesburg railway station in 1923. After a number of changes in the constitution, changes which we deemed highly necessary, real leadership developed under our late friend Joon.<sup>14</sup>

Du Plessis himself and Joon van Rooy converted from their earlier “narrow dopperism” and were saved from the shift towards “Afrikaner humanism” that

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8. On his academic career, see Van der Schyff, *Wonderdaad*, pp 163, 169, 186–189, 199, 232, 313, 383–384, 398, 413.
  9. L.J. du Plessis, *Apartheid: Ja of Nee of Ja-nee? Broeder Buskes Broederlik Beantwoord* (Pro-Rege Pers, Potchefstroom, 1957), p 12. Quotation translated from the original Afrikaans.
  10. G. Schutte, *De Vrije Universiteit en Zuid-Afrika, 1880–2005* (Meinema, Zoetermeer, 2005), p 233, 309ff. See also Van der Schyff, *Wonderdaad*, p 208.
  11. J. Koch, *Abraham Kuyper: Een Biografie* (Boom, Amsterdam, 2006), pp 285ff.
  12. See Potgieter, *L.J. du Plessis as Denker*, pp 26ff. On the influence of the Kuyperian philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd, see Potgieter, *L.J. du Plessis as Denker*, pp 40ff., 56ff., 197; T.D. Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom: Power, Apartheid and the Afrikaner Civil Religion* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1975), pp 118–119. On the reactions in Potchefstroom after Kuyper’s death in 1920, see Van der Schyff, *Wonderdaad*, p. 347. On Du Plessis as Calvinist academic see Van der Schyff, *Wonderdaad* p 390; and L.J. du Plessis, “Die Calvinisme in sy Aktualiteit Gehandhaaf”, *Koers*, 11, 6, 1944, pp 185–194, esp. p 190.
  13. On the very broad range of his interests, which prevented him from giving his work an inner consistency and to finish his PhD thesis, see Potgieter, *L.J. du Plessis as Denker*, pp 1, 18.
  14. Heritage Foundation, Pretoria, Archive of the Afrikaner Broederbond (hereafter AB Archive), L.J. du Plessis – Chief Secretary, Broederbond, 16 July 1960, Letter of resignation (no reference no.). Translated from the original Afrikaans.

developed later, by their professors, Totius and Jan Kamp.<sup>15</sup> Under Van Rooy's leadership they kept their distance from party politics.

However, Du Plessis himself started to become involved in the "Purified" National Party shortly after its launching in 1934. Although he took office in the first leadership trio of the party, he never developed any ambitions to embark on a parliamentary career. He always stayed aloof from party politics,<sup>16</sup> because he abhorred both the attitude of career politicians and the caucus discipline in political parties. In contrast to the petty politicking, he regarded himself as a visionary who could think strategically, someone who showed the way out of petty party squabbles. This attitude helps to explain his activities during the Second World War, when he began several initiatives within the Broederbond and advocated a "non-party state" on behalf of the Ossewabrandwag.<sup>17</sup> In fact, Du Plessis was apolitical and hated the intrigues and tactics of politicians, for which he developed neither taste nor understanding. His many activities make it easy to overlook the fact that he often cut his own path and therefore his efforts were sometimes unsuccessful.<sup>18</sup> This explains his sympathies for the OB and why it was easy for politicians to outmanoeuvre him. Du Plessis saw himself as the victim of political schemers; this was a recurring issue in the 1950s. Hendrik Verwoerd, his main adversary, became the incarnation of party politics for him. Du Plessis held the pettiness of party politicians responsible for his failure during the war years and in the 1950s. Nevertheless, it must be underlined that the initiatives and plans which he launched during the 1940s were often impracticable and did not come to fruition.<sup>19</sup>

### The conflict about the Ossewabrandwag

The OB was founded in the aftermath of the symbolic oxwagon trek of 1938. After the outbreak of the Second World War the OB rapidly developed into a countrywide mass movement. Its martial demeanour, the consistent rumours about military coups and its popular success, motivated the National Party to tighten its control through its own representatives within the leading body, the Grootraad (Great Council).<sup>20</sup> At the

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15. For information about the early influence of Potchefstroom academics on the Broederbond, see AB Archive, E.L.P. Stals, "Gesiedenis van die Afrikaner Broederbond 1918–1994", unpublished manuscript 1998, p 38; and Van der Schyff, *Wonderdaad*, pp 484ff.
  16. Potgieter, *L.J. du Plessis as Denker*, pp 201ff.
  17. His writings in the 1940s clearly reveal his rejection of parties. See L.J. du Plessis, *Die Moderne Staat* (Pro Ecclesia, Stellenbosch, 1941), esp. pp 19, 108ff.; "Vraagstukke van die Volksverteenwoordiging", *Koers*, 8, 4, 1941, pp 127–135; "Die Loop van die Dinge", *Koers*, 8, 6, 1941, pp 238–241, esp. p 241; *Die Jeug en Ons Toekomststaat* (Afrikaanse Nasionale Jeugbeweging, Stellenbosch, 1942), esp. p 3; and "Die Loop van die Dinge", *Koers*, 10, 6, 1943, pp 235–237, esp. p 235.
  18. This is the reason why his influence has frequently been overestimated, e.g. by O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years*, p xxix. O'Meara characterises him as "the key Broederbond figure". In my view, this epithet would be much more appropriate for the shadowy figure of Joon van Rooy, who was chairman for a total of 16 years. See A.N. Pelzer, *Die Afrikaner-Broederbond: Eerste 50 Jaar* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1979), p 41.
  19. Schoeman, *Die Broederbond in die Afrikaner-Politiek* (Aktuele Publikasies, Pretoria, 1982), p 44. Unfortunately there is no biography on Du Plessis, but Potgieter's study has a biographical sketch. See Potgieter, *L.J. du Plessis as Denker*, pp 8–25.
  20. The leadership of the movement fell to the Grootraad after the enforced resignation of the first kommandant-generaal of the OB, J.C. Laas, which was dominated by C.R. Kotzé and the NP politician C.R. Swart during the second half of 1940.

beginning of 1941, Hans van Rensburg, an outspoken enemy of parliamentary democracy and admirer of fascist systems, became the new kommandant-generaal, the leader of the movement. A bitter rivalry developed between the National Party and the Ossewabrandwag about the political leadership of Afrikaner nationalism. This developed quickly within the first half of that same year and escalated into open conflict from June onwards. The party claimed the sole right to represent “Afrikanerdom” in the political sphere, whereas the OB increasingly presented itself as an anti-parliamentary and extra-parliamentary alternative, hoping to profit from Hitler’s success in the war. The executive of the Broederbond formed a committee to formulate general policy and passed a draft constitution for a future republic at the end of 1940. The official history of the Broederbond confirms that Du Plessis and Verwoerd were the main authors of the draft constitution.<sup>21</sup> As Du Plessis put it in a letter, “what I conceptualised in a Calvinist spirit ... Dr Verwoerd steered in the direction of corporatism”.<sup>22</sup> Verwoerd himself denied that Van Rensburg or any other OB members played a decisive role in the drafting of the constitution.<sup>23</sup> The OB published this text, which placed the NP in a politically difficult situation because of its fascist leanings and authoritarian tenor, although the Bondsraad of the Broederbond gave it its blessing.<sup>24</sup> In addition, members of the NP accused the OB of transgressing the limits of its sphere of activity.

When Van Rensburg began to meddle in the party’s internal affairs, the conflict quickly escalated. This was the moment when Du Plessis stepped in to effect a conciliation. He succeeded in bringing both sides together for negotiations and agreement was eventually reached although not without several modifications on a number of occasions. Although the sole representation of the NP in the field of “party politics” was confirmed in a range of different papers and settlements, all attempts at conciliation foundered on the interpretation of this term. While the NP understood it to be a monopoly of political leadership of “Afrikanerdom” in general, the OB perceived political leadership as being restricted to parliamentary politics, a notion which they rejected anyway. This opened the way for the OB; it continued its political activity, a stance which Du Plessis agreed with more or less openly. He was elected as chairman of an Afrikaner Eenheids Komitee (AEK) a committee that was charged with the task of mediating between the NP and OB. When he proposed that this committee play a supreme political leadership role, the NP promptly rejected the suggestion.<sup>25</sup> Understandably, party representatives observed Du Plessis with growing suspicion<sup>26</sup> and suspected that he was a secret follower of the OB. For this reason they did everything they could to make the Unity Committee’s experiment fail.<sup>27</sup> But even

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21. Stals, “Geskiiedenis van die Afrikaner Broederbond”, p 116.
  22. AB Archive, L.J. du Plessis – Chief Secretary, Broederbond, 16 July 1960. Translated from the original Afrikaans.
  23. “Hoe die Ontwerp-Grondwet Ontstaan het”, *Die Transvaler*, 16 October 1941..
  24. AB Archive, 2/3/10/1, Notes on the 20th regular Bondsraad, Bloemfontein, 6 October 1941, chairman’s address.
  25. See also AFCH, M.P.A. Malan Collection, PV 34/8, C.R. Swart, “Politieke Geskiedenis 1933–40”, undated manuscript, p 66.
  26. AFCH, PV 93/1/1/1, p 3ff., Verwoerd’s notes on Du Plessis’ speech. He wrote down the subtle differences Du Plessis introduced between politics and party politics and how he tried to achieve equality between the organisations. He refers to the meeting on 1 September 1941 in Bloemfontein. The full text of Du Plessis’ speech is in the notes on this meeting of the Afrikaner Unity Committee, in the above-mentioned file in the Verwoerd Collection, p 160ff.
  27. On the particulars, see Marx, *Oxwagon Sentinel*, pp 414ff.

more than the personal loss of face, it was the lost opportunity for conciliation that hurt Du Plessis the most. He feared that the Afrikaner *volk* would suffer if the confrontation was allowed to escalate any further.

Much later, in 1960, Du Plessis accused the Broederbond of commissioning him and then leaving him in the lurch. He did his work “in closest consultation with the UR and with his friend Joon in particular”, but he was “repudiated” by him, by the Broederbond chairman, Diederichs, by Piet Meyer, and finally even by the Bondsraad, the highest authority in the Broederbond. Diederichs and Meyer had been much closer to Van Rensburg than Du Plessis himself, since he still was a “functionary” of the NP at the time. It was only later that he became friends with Van Rensburg, whom he held in high regard. When Du Plessis was elected chairman of the AEK this caused “great bitterness” for Malan, the leader of the NP who “published the draft constitution and went on to wreck the unity committee and to annihilate the OB before the Germans could win the war, which he as well as Dr Van Rensburg hoped for, but I didn’t”.<sup>28</sup> After consulting Van Rooy, Diederichs, Meyer and others, Du Plessis presented his report in the Bondsraad, but many members of the NP opposed it, because they felt that he was biased. Afterwards Van Rooy, Diederichs, Lombard and Meyer made sure that his report was omitted from the documents of the Bondsraad.<sup>29</sup>

During the subsequent meeting of the UR the conflict escalated when Du Plessis defended himself against accusations that he was partial in his approach to conciliation. He attacked Verwoerd’s interpretation of the party’s demand for a sole leadership role and recommended new forms of political action, saying: “The *volk* will not be satisfied by the party alone.”<sup>30</sup> Not even the neutral style of the minutes could conceal Du Plessis’ indignation. He accused party members of being responsible for undermining all Van Rooy’s attempts to effect a conciliation with General Hertzog in the late 1930s. This was after J.B.M. Hertzog (the party’s founder and prime minister at the time) had led a large number of NP members into fusion with Jan Smuts’ South African Party, a move that was rejected by hard-line Afrikaner nationalists. Now, Du Plessis argued, they had acted against him in the same way. Although the OB was not founded by the Broederbond and there was a reluctance to become involved with the movement as long as Laas was kommandant-generaal, “[t]his attitude changed towards sympathetic interest and co-operation after the brothers definitively gained the leadership within the OB, especially through the person of Dr J.F.J. van Rensburg”. The issue at hand was not to take sides, but rather to “consolidate”. For this reason, Du Plessis suggested again that a super ordinate, strategic body be formed. However, this was not approved by the UR.<sup>31</sup>

In the next meeting the UR decided to abstain from further attempts at conciliation; it merely resolved that there be mutual attempts to strive for

28. AB Archive, L.J. du Plessis – Chief Secretary, Broederbond, 16 July 1960. Translated from the original Afrikaans.
29. AB Archive, 2/3/10/1, Notes on the 20th regular Bondsraad, Bloemfontein, 6 October 1941, Agenda no. 6: Report of the policy commission. Following a motion by Eben Dönges no discussion of the report was allowed.
30. AB Archive, Notes of the UR meeting in Johannesburg, 24 October 1941, Agenda no. 10: “Consolidation of Afrikanerdom”, p 4. The accusation that the report was biased came from Dönges, see p 7. Quotations translated from the original Afrikaans.
31. AB Archive, UR, 24 October 1941, Agenda no. 10, “Consolidation of Afrikanerdom”, p. 4.

compromise and brotherliness.<sup>32</sup> Du Plessis was probably pushed out of office by a powerful coterie of NP-aligned followers under Verwoerd's leadership, just as Broederbond chairman, Nicholas Diederichs had been. Diederichs was Van Rensburg's friend and sympathised with his political views.<sup>33</sup> Although Diederichs had stood for re-election, it was Joon van Rooy, the trusted former chairman and a close friend of Verwoerd, who was elected.<sup>34</sup> A short time afterwards, Verwoerd started to campaign for the separation of the different Afrikaans organisations. This was directed against P.J. Meyer, who had collected quite a number of secretary posts in different organisations.<sup>35</sup> In December 1942, Meyer was forced to quit his AB post.<sup>36</sup>

In its meeting on 5 March 1943 the managing committee of the Broederbond also dealt with a letter from Du Plessis in which he declared his resignation as a member of the UR of the secret society.<sup>37</sup> He maintained that the true reason for his resignation was that the UR had merely become a stage for "fruitless discussions for hours on end between ... Hertzog and Verwoerd about the OB's list of sins".<sup>38</sup> Du Plessis resigned from "different organisations of the *volk*" in the following years because politicians increasingly dominated the Broederbond.<sup>39</sup>

Instead, Du Plessis joined the Ossewabrandwag Great Council and was active there for some time. The main reason for this step was certainly his bitterness over his treatment by the NP. However, it should not be overlooked that the rather apolitical academic from Potchefstroom fostered some genuine sympathies for fascist concepts of order. In his book *Die Moderne Staat*, published in 1941, he made it clear that his anti-democratic stance was in line with global developments, which his namesake, the NP functionary Otto du Plessis called the "revolution" of the twentieth century.<sup>40</sup> This was a reference to what appeared to be a worldwide rejection of democracy and particularly a rejection of liberalism.<sup>41</sup> The term liberalism is used here in the way that right wing Afrikaner nationalists in South Africa would have understood it. Liberalism to those such as Diederichs or L.J. du Plessis was almost synonymous with

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32. AB Archive, 2/3/10/1, UR, 23 January 1942, Agenda no. 8, Proposal by Dönges. This position was confirmed against Du Plessis' wishes during a later UR meeting. See UR, 5 March 1942, Agenda no. 16, pp 2-3.
  33. AB Archive, 2/3/10/1, Bondsraad 2-3 October 1942, Agenda no. 19.
  34. AB Archive, 2/3/10/1, Bondsraad 2-3 October 1942, Agenda no. 20.
  35. AB Archive, 2/3/10/1, Bondsraad 2-3 October 1942, Agenda no. 19; UR meeting, 30 October 1942, Agenda no. 21, p 4.
  36. AB Archive, 2/3/10/1, Dagebestuur, 3 December 1942, Agenda no. 5; and UR meeting, 29/30 January 1943, Agenda no. 12, pp 3-4, in which Meyer's resignation from other functions is announced. The letters can be found in Agenda and Reports, UR, 29/30 January 1943, pp 2-3. See also UR, 3-4 September 1943 with a remarkably extensive list of members, whose membership lapsed or who were reprimanded.
  37. AB Archive, 2/3/10/1, Dagebestuur, 5 March 1943, Agenda no. 12.
  38. AB Archive, L.J. du Plessis – Chief Secretary, Broederbond, 16 July 1960. Translated from the original Afrikaans.
  39. L.J. du Plessis – Chief Secretary, Broederbond, 16 July 1960. Translated from the original Afrikaans.
  40. O. du Plessis, *Die Nuwe Suid-Afrika: Die Revolusie van die Twintigste Eeu* (Nasionale Pers, Cape Town, 1940). On L.J. du Plessis' attitude to socialism, see Potgieter, *L.J. du Plessis as Denker*, pp 166ff.
  41. Democracy to L.J. du Plessis was a means to reconstruct God's legal order on earth. See L.J. du Plessis, "Die Krisis van die Demokrasie", *Koers*, 1, 1, 1933, pp 25-31, esp. p 26; and L.J. du Plessis, "Konstitusionele Hervorming", *Koers*, 1, 6, 1934, pp 5-8.

a limitless individualism, something they perceived as “atomism”. In other words, it was the complete isolation of self-centred individuals; they only followed their own interests. Communism in this understanding was the collectivist variant of this phenomenon, since it supposedly disregarded organic communities and forced individuals into an artificial collectivity without any cultural bonds or connections.<sup>42</sup>

Like other Afrikaner nationalists, Du Plessis saw individuals primarily as members of organic communities like the *volk*. Since democracy gave power to the people as the sum of individuals, the public order should be built on communities. Hence his sympathies with corporatist and authoritarian orders. Democracy was dependent on individuals who were manipulated by political parties for their own sake. In his view, the will of the *volk* could best be expressed in the form of top-down structures. During the 1950s he still clung to these convictions but he silently dropped his advocacy of authoritarianism, although he never became a genuine adherent of liberal parliamentary democracy.<sup>43</sup>

Du Plessis’ sympathies for concepts of fascist order were restricted by his strong Calvinist convictions. But this did not prevent him from rejecting the parliamentary system and party politics in general. He rejected the secular nationalist extremism of Diederichs’ (in *Nasionalisme as Lewensbeskouing*) and Meyer’s (in *Trek Verder*), as idolatry.<sup>44</sup> His own understanding of Calvinist politics took the word of God as the guiding hand and God’s law as the very fundament of political order.<sup>45</sup> His Calvinist nationalism was built on the understanding that God had created the multitude of peoples and it was man’s task to conserve it.

Although Du Plessis became the main ideologist of the OB by 1943, his impact on the movement was rather limited, because he was too quixotic.<sup>46</sup> In the years following the conflict with the NP and the first mass resignations, the Ossewabrandwag increasingly developed into a reservoir of dissatisfied, yet apolitical intellectuals; they dominated the Grootraad and other bodies. After his short spell in the OB leadership,<sup>47</sup> Du Plessis gave up his professorship at Potchefstroom in 1946<sup>48</sup> and became a businessman and manager in several Afrikaans enterprises of the Afrikaner nationalist “economic movement”, which to a large extent was built on his initiative.<sup>49</sup> This commitment was the main reason why he declined to serve as

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42. N. Diederichs, “Die Fascistiese Staatsfilosofie”, *Die Huisgenoot*, 3 November 1933, pp 17, 67, 69, 7.

43. Marx, *Oxwagon Sentinel*, pp 212ff.

44. AB Archive, L.J. du Plessis – Chief Secretary, Broederbond, 16 July 1960. See also Du Plessis’ review of Diederichs’ booklet, *Nasionalisme as Lewensbeskouing*, in *Koers*, 4, 1, 1936, p 30.

45. L.J. du Plessis, “Calvinisme en die Politiek”, in H.G. Stoker, F.J.M. Potgieter and J.D. Vorster (eds), *Koers in die Krisis, Deel I* (Pro Ecclesia, Stellenbosch 1935), pp 263–272.

46. On Du Plessis’ contribution to the OB ideology, see Marx, *Oxwagon Sentinel*, pp 500ff. P. de Klerk estimates the influence of Du Plessis, Stoker and others as limited. See P. de Klerk, “Die Ideologie van die Ossewa-Brandwag”, in P.F. van der Schyff (ed), *Die Ossewa-Brandwag: Vuurtjie in Droë Gras* (PU vir CHO, Potchefstroom, 1991), pp 292–331, esp. p 319.

47. AFCH, PV 93/1/56/1, H.F. Verwoerd – J. G. Strijdom, 29 August 1944: “... I was told that he [Du Plessis] doesn’t attend meetings of the Grootraad any more” (translated).

48. Van der Schyff, *Wonderdaad*, pp 419–420.

49. Stals, “Geschiedenis van die Afrikaner Broederbond”, pp 39, 65.



chairman of the Broederbond for a second term.<sup>50</sup> He only took up his university career at Potchefstroom again in 1952.

### The struggle about apartheid begins

The fierce confrontations between Du Plessis and Verwoerd in the 1940s laid the foundation for mutual antipathy and deep-seated mistrust between the two men. It was only with some effort that they concealed these feelings with dry and distant formality. Nevertheless, they still had some contact with reference to the new policy of apartheid during the early 1950s. Du Plessis sent a manuscript to Verwoerd,<sup>51</sup> on which Verwoerd commented that he had read it with great interest; he even admitted to agreement on certain points:

It was interesting to compare my own opinion on policy and its application with that of yours. It was also intellectually stimulating to see your perspectives on the international scene, your political-philosophical ideas, as well as the comparisons with what has happened in other parts of Africa.<sup>52</sup>

In 1950, Verwoerd was appointed Minister of Native Affairs. In the following years he drew expertise from other departments towards his own and virtually built up a state within a state. His department had an almost universal competence for anything in the field of “native affairs” in the late 1950s. This former professor at the University of Stellenbosch had an emphatic understanding of what scientifically based politics could achieve. In his view, this had an inherent, logical conclusiveness. During Verwoerd’s term of office as a minister, his arrogant attitude developed into an intolerance of other viewpoints and a distinctive sense of mission. He clashed increasingly with the SABRA when it began to conceptualise interpretations that were contrary to his own political conceptions.

In similar vein, Verwoerd rejected the comprehensive report of the Tomlinson Commission, a body appointed by his predecessor E.G. Janssen. Verwoerd was not prepared to invest huge sums into the homeland economies as the commission recommended. In addition to differing political views, personal motives also played a role here, especially Verwoerd’s violent antipathy towards Tomlinson, which had arisen in their student days together at Stellenbosch.<sup>53</sup> Then too, Verwoerd resigned as a member of SABRA in 1958, setting in motion an open confrontation with the bureau.<sup>54</sup> Most of the intellectuals who were critical of Verwoerd were excluded from SABRA’s leadership and effectively silenced in the following years.<sup>55</sup> Shortly afterwards another conflict broke out between Verwoerd and the daily newspaper *Die*

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50. Stals, “Geskiedenis van die Afrikaner Broederbond”, p 42. Du Plessis became chairman of the Ekonomiese Instituut, which fulfilled the function of a strategic centre of this movement. See D. O’Meara, *Volkskapitalisme: Class, Capital and Ideology in the Development of Afrikaner Nationalism, 1934–1948* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983), p 135.
  51. AFCH, PV 93/3/1/8, p 53, L.J. du Plessis – Verwoerd, 1 March 1951; and p 58, Verwoerd’s initial reply on 8 March 1951, that he had not yet had the time to read it.
  52. AFCH, PV 93/3/1/8, p 91, H.F. Verwoerd – L.J. du Plessis, 27 April 1951. Translated from the original Afrikaans.
  53. B.M. Schoeman, *Van Malan tot Verwoerd* (Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 1973) p 231.
  54. AFCH, J.F. Barnard Collection, PV 276/14/5/2, p 18, H.F. Verwoerd – SABRA, 5 December 1957.
  55. Lazar, “Conformity and Conflict”, pp 207ff.

*Burger*, the most influential mouthpiece of Afrikaner nationalism. The issue at hand was the political situation of the coloured population.<sup>56</sup> In addition, a witch-hunt ensued against Afrikaans theologians who participated in the Cottesloe consultation against apartheid held in the early 1960s.<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, the editor of *Die Burger*, Piet Cillié, was one of the few in NP ranks who appreciated the importance of people like Du Plessis and the critical intellectuals in SABRA.<sup>58</sup> Verwoerd's intolerance of dissent was typical of the Afrikaner nationalist movement during the 1950s. The tight discipline and the marginalisation of political views that were not sanctioned by the leadership was a result of the elitist domination of Afrikaner cultural organisations by the National Party and the Broederbond. Verwoerd was a member of the Broederbond UR from 1940 to 1950 and held power in a range of party offices. He was thus well positioned to build up a tightly controlled and authoritarian movement. As minister and later prime minister, he was a representative of this system as well as one of its main protagonists.

It was in the context of these still-undecided conflicts that Du Plessis re-entered the public sphere. It soon became apparent that his position had changed since the 1940s, although not in every respect.<sup>59</sup> A number of his publications from the 1950s reveal the extent of his development. In one pamphlet he tackled the criticism of apartheid as expressed by the Dutch theologian J.J. Buskes. Du Plessis diligently unravelled the different points Buskes made and developed a well-balanced opinion. As an Afrikaner nationalist, he was in favour of apartheid but in his view this should include the black majority's right to self-determination. This was why he rejected apartheid,

when its practical application tends to hamper or block this development or if it replaces it with a permanent, albeit a benevolent trusteeship; because viable nations don't want bread and games, they strive instead for responsible self-determination to meet their need for self-realisation.<sup>60</sup>

His criticism of the government was somewhat cautious and alluded to the instances of party political controversy. The result of party politics was that the government "cannot follow a radical or consistent apartheid policy".<sup>61</sup> He maintained that only a policy such as his could achieve a just political dispensation. Du Plessis was an advocate of a radical form of apartheid, which encompassed far-reaching economic separation as the precondition for economically viable black states in South Africa.

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56. J.C. Steyn, *Penvegter: Piet Cillié van Die Burger* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2002), ch. 7; F.A. Mouton, *Voorloper: Die Lewe van Schalk Pienaar* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2002), pp 42ff.
57. A.H. Lückhoff, *Cottesloe* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1978), pp 116ff.; J. Kinghorn, C. Borchardt, B. Combrink, E. de Villiers, J. Groenewald, F. Theron and M. Wiechers, *Die NG Kerk en Apartheid* (Macmillan, Johannesburg, 1986), p 119.
58. L. Louw (ed), *Dawie 1946–1964: 'n Bloemlesing uit die Geskrifte van Die Burger se Politieke Kommentator* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1965), p 140 (11 January 1958). Cillié's appreciation of the dissenting stance in SABRA was certainly enhanced by the fact that one of his predecessors as editor of *Die Burger*, A.L. Geyer, was a member of the executive and for some time even chairman of SABRA.
59. On Du Plessis' earlier opinion on segregation, which was strongly influenced by his cultural nationalism and did not substantially differ from the positions which were widespread at the time, see Van der Schyff, *Wonderdaad*, pp 531 ff. and pp 568–569.
60. Du Plessis, *Apartheid: Ja of Nee?*, p 40. Translated from the original Afrikaans.
61. Du Plessis, *Apartheid: Ja of Nee?*, p 24. Translated from the original Afrikaans.

He still regarded himself as an Afrikaner cultural nationalist, for whom the emancipation from British imperialism (indeed from all imperialism), was of utmost importance. He was also explicit in his commitment to apartheid because of his strong nationalism.<sup>62</sup> His understanding of apartheid was primarily with reference to the white, Afrikaner population. He opted for separation in the sense of the preservation of a distinct cultural nationalist profile of the *volk*. This more “introverted” attitude towards apartheid allowed him greater flexibility with regard to its application on the black majority than was the case with Verwoerd’s outlook. Verwoerd’s dogged stubbornness at the time disturbed even his closest friends.<sup>63</sup>

### Du Plessis’ new concepts: Apartheid and decolonisation

Du Plessis gave a number of talks, most of them to Afrikaans nationalist audiences in the early months of 1958. When a storm of indignation broke out within the NP, he began to publish a series of articles in the second half of that year and 1959, in which he argued that a correction of the NP’s course was necessary, and justified this accordingly. At the same time he circulated memoranda on his ideas within nationalist circles and made these papers available to Verwoerd as well.

As was the case with Verwoerd, Du Plessis was influenced in the adjustment of his political position by the accelerating emergence of independence movements elsewhere in Africa and impending decolonisation throughout the continent.<sup>64</sup> Verwoerd reacted mainly rhetorically and propagandistically when he introduced the prospect of bantustan independence in his first major speech as newly elected prime minister in early 1959, because realistically he did not intend to develop these areas towards economic viability. Du Plessis, on the other hand, took African decolonisation movements seriously as the expression of a genuine African nationalism. His own Afrikaner nationalism led him to accept the right of self-determination of African peoples. In other words, he acknowledged the fundamental legitimacy and inevitability of nationalism and anti-imperialism amongst Africans. Furthermore, his intellectual prowess drove him to a further conclusion, namely the support of the independence movement among South Africa’s black population. With ever more emphasis, Du Plessis urged the white power elite to develop a more positive approach towards the political ambitions of blacks. He felt that they should be told “as soon as possible” that they were to be given their freedom. Even SABRA had not yet reached this point. However, he did not aim at a mere continuation of the homeland policy, because as far as he was concerned, the black “government hirelings”, on whom the government relied, were anything but representative. It was rather the black educated elite who should be seen as legitimate partners for negotiations. Du Plessis explicitly included the ANC, but not the communists. He pointed out that the ANC comprised not only radical elements, but had quite a number

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62. *Cape Times*, 28 April 1959.

63. Even convinced nationalists like the journalist M.E. Rothman were concerned about the polarisation Verwoerd instigated against dissenters within his own party: J.C. Steyn, *Die 100 Jaar van MER* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2004), pp 490–491.

64. See L.J. du Plessis, “Staatkundige Toestande in Afrika”, unpublished seminar paper submitted to the Africa seminar at Potchefstroom University, 23 April 1958; and Potgieter, *L.J. du Plessis as Denker*, p 120.

of moderate politicians like Albert Luthuli among its leaders, men who were prepared to find a political compromise.<sup>65</sup>

Du Plessis expressed the view that if the white population of South Africa failed to take the movement for independence and the African will to freedom seriously, these movements would turn against them and “we will be ploughed under”. He saw swift action as crucial. In contrast, Verwoerd prophesied that the new social order, i.e. the lasting success of apartheid, would be achieved within a period of 20 years. The reality was that integration was destined to continue. Du Plessis had predicted as much when he said that integration would be an alternative that had to be accepted if apartheid failed. In fact he had rejected the principle of “trusteeship”, which had been the ideological twin of apartheid since the 1940s, a principal to which Verwoerd still clung.<sup>66</sup> With increasing conviction and resolution, Du Plessis declared openly that he was in favour of the emancipation of Africans. To him it was less a radical break with the policy of racial segregation that was necessary, than a shift in the attitude on which it was built:

It is against our conscience to stem the tide. Just like the East has become free, so without doubt Africa's nations must also become free. To my regret, I must say that thus far we have been very half-hearted towards this. We want nationalism for ourselves but do not accord it to others. We have not even sent an envoy to Ghana yet. We count nowhere because we regard this movement [African nationalism] with a cold, unwilling and almost petty spirit. Why do we not welcome the free nations as we want to be welcomed as a free nation? It is because our conscience is guilty? We ourselves are the oppressors of non-white nations.<sup>67</sup>

Du Plessis argued that it was important to make concessions at the right moment in order not to lose the political initiative. Afrikaner nationalists who had always regarded themselves as the vanguard of anti-imperialism now ran the risk of drifting into the political sidelines. The only viable solution for South Africa was to divide the country among whites and blacks. When he was asked about the “primitive” state of civilisation of the black population, Du Plessis answered during a talk in Melville that a precondition for black advancement was a rise in their wages. In his view this would lead to a scarcity of labour in the “white” economy and this in turn could be compensated for by a policy of massive white immigration.<sup>68</sup>

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65. *The Star*, 28 May 1958.

66. His earlier position is documented in sentences such as: “Absolute segregation is not the Calvinist principle, but is white trusteeship and does not imply equality”. see L.J. du Plessis, “Liberalistiese en Calvinistiese Naturelle-Politiek”, in H.G. Stoker, F.J.M. Potgieter and J.D. Vorster (eds), *Koers in die Krisis, Deel II* (Pro Ecclesia, Stellenbosch, 1940), p 231 and further in pp 221–234. On his earlier notion of race which denied any ability of the “Bantu” to develop culturally and which excluded assimilation generally, see L.J. du Plessis, “Rasseverhoudinge”, *Koers*, 1, 2, 1933, pp 10–15, esp. p 13.

67. *The Star*, 28 May 1958.

68. *Cape Times*, 17 March 1959. See also AB Archive, PV 35/2/3/1/1/4, Du Plessis' letter of 19 May 1958 to the members of the Dagbreektrust, including his viewpoints and demanding an end to the Treason Trial. The first time he advocated immigration from Europe in public was in L.J. Du Plessis, “Immigrasie in Suid-Afrika”, *Journal of Racial Affairs*, 5, 2, 1954, pp 35–43. On the irony of South Africa as the former vanguard of anti-imperialism becoming the last bastion of colonialism, see C. Marx, “Ethnische Herrschaft, Gold und der anti-imperialistische Kolonialismus Südafrikas”, in G. Hübinger, J. Osterhammel and E. Pelzer (eds), *Universalgeschichte und Nationalgeschichten* (Rombach, Freiburg, 1994), pp 269–289.

Du Plessis broke with central taboos of current policy, especially when he proposed that the bantustans be enlarged; be grouped into five or six states; and be granted independence. Thereafter, these states should be grouped together in a federation with white South Africa. Certainly, the state that contributed the most economically should be accorded the greatest influence. In this way, he said, “the dominant role of the white man will be maintained for a long time”.<sup>69</sup> For him this was the only solution as a middle course between total separation and total integration, both of which he regarded as untenable.<sup>70</sup> “Such a solution will combine a practicable separate development with a harmless multi-racialism.” The decisive economic development of black areas was a precondition to such a solution; it would also necessarily imply a drastic reduction of blacks in “white” South Africa. Economic separation was the fundamental premise to establish a successful white nation state. In addition, the contact between elite groups of different races should not be inhibited, which is what the NP government wanted.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, Du Plessis was returning to some of the central proposals made by the Tomlinson Commission, because, like Tomlinson, he identified an irreconcilable contradiction in principle between a system of racist privilege and a just solution to South Africa’s social problems and territorial division. On the other hand, Verwoerd had always claimed that both were possible within one grand solution.

*The Star* highlighted this weak point in Verwoerd’s policy in a commentary on 30 May 1958:

His theory of gradualism would carry more conviction if the aim towards which it is leading were more clearly defined, but Professor du Plessis and SABRA have been no more successful than Opposition critics in persuading the Minister to say what he means.<sup>72</sup>

Owen Vine, *The Star* commentator, clearly underestimated the radical nature of Du Plessis’ political turnabout when he maintained that the difference between this and Verwoerd’s position was merely a difference in approach. He realised that Verwoerd aimed at the broad masses of uneducated blacks and agreed that “to speak of such people having a say in running the country” was unrealistic. “The paternalism of White rule seems genuinely appropriate to their very early stage of development.” On the other hand, according to Vine, Du Plessis focused on the minority of blacks, the educated elite, those whom Verwoerd regarded as unrepresentative of the black majority. Contrary to Vine’s interpretation, Du Plessis in fact saw African nationalism per se as legitimate without any exclusive reference to the educated elite.<sup>73</sup> Much more was involved than merely different perspectives on different social strata. There was a fundamental difference between a cultural relativism motivated by racism (Verwoerd) and a civilising mission (Du Plessis).

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69. Quoted in *The Star*, 28 May 1958; a similar report appeared in *Die Transvaler*, 30 May 1958.

70. *Rand Daily Mail*, 10 March 1959. H.G. Stoker, one of Du Plessis’ colleagues at Potchefstroom University, rejected even a moderate form of integration which would have given a common municipal vote to urban blacks. On the other hand, he advocated political rights for urban blacks within the framework of apartheid: AFCH, PV 35/2/3/1/1/4, J. de Klerk Collection, H.G. Stoker – J. de Klerk, 24 October 1958.

71. *Rand Daily Mail*, 10 March 1959.

72. *The Star*, 30 March 1958, editorial.

73. *The Star*, 28 May 1958, commentary.

### The confrontation with Verwoerd

Verwoerd observed Du Plessis' proceedings closely and marked the important passages in the newspaper reports on his speeches. He must have been somewhat alarmed because the professor's ideas were obviously met with interest by a growing number of people.<sup>74</sup> It was not only that an alternative to his own policy had emerged, (although he confidently claimed his policy to be without any realistic alternative<sup>75</sup>) but he also had to face the possibility of losing the political initiative to others. This was one of the reasons for his rejection of the Tomlinson Report, because Verwoerd hated to implement proposals made by others. He preferred to set the direction himself. Verwoerd responded promptly to the report in *The Star*. In *Die Vaderland*, he strongly denied, that Du Plessis expressed NP policy and emphasised that the professor had been known to come up with dissenting opinions in the past. These, according to Verwoerd, often proved incorrect when events unfolded. Nor did he leave the matter with this allusion to Du Plessis' role in the early 1940s. He persisted with his criticism, insisting that Du Plessis' views were by no means representative of NP policy. Indeed, in several instances what he had said was not only wrong but also irresponsible.<sup>76</sup> The next day Verwoerd expressed his own views, which to him were not racially biased but based on objective facts. He accused Du Plessis of closing his eyes to the fact "that the speed of development [of different racial groups] was not influenced by external, environmental factors, but rather by innate hereditary factors at different stages."<sup>77</sup>

After suffering this verbal attack, Du Plessis' criticism of his opponent also became more personal. He revealed in an article on 22 June 1958 that the infamous draft constitution of 1940 had been devised within Broederbond circles. It had been "rather Calvinistic in a Cromwellian fashion", but the "Salazar-features", the fascist ideas, came from a "gentleman whose name begins with a 'V'". He left it open to conjecture whether he meant Verwoerd or the OB leader, Van Rensburg.<sup>78</sup> A letter to Verwoerd some months later revealed that Du Plessis admitted to pangs of conscience "whether my trivial and mostly joking and indirect linking of your name with the draft Republican constitution was not a break of trust". Certainly he alluded to the obligation to secrecy of the Broederbond. But as far as his reference to the content of the draft constitution was concerned, he took nothing back; he emphasised that in the long run "those non-whites remaining within the white areas cannot be merely referred to the Bantu-areas when it comes to their civil rights".<sup>79</sup> With this letter, a

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74. On the approval Du Plessis received inter alia from the ANC for his proposal to found multiracial clubs and to exclude African diplomats from the apartheid regulations, see *The Star* 5 February and 6 February 1959.

75. C. Marx, "Hendrik Verwoerd's Long March to Apartheid: Nationalism and Racism in South Africa", in M. Berg and S. Wendt (eds), *Global Dimensions of Racism in the Modern World: Comparative and Transnational Perspectives* (Berghahn, New York, forthcoming). See also Steyn, *Die 100 Jaar van MER*, p 496.

76. *Die Vaderland*, 29 May 1958. Translated from the original Afrikaans.

77. G.D. Scholtz, *Dr Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd, 1901-1966, Deel 1* (Perskor, Johannesburg, 1974), p 299.

78. *Sunday Express*, 22 June 1958.

79. AFCH, PV 93/3/1/16, p 145ff., L.J. du Plessis – H.F. Verwoerd, 24 September 1958. He mentions that the initiative to write a draft constitution came from P.S. de Klerk and landed at the door of the Broederbond after many deviations. Verwoerd's reply dated 12 December

certain pattern emerged in the correspondence between Du Plessis and Verwoerd; Du Plessis repeatedly apologised for personal attacks but remained steadfast in his political convictions.

Now others also began to attack Du Plessis and this led to a well organised campaign culminating in his expulsion from the National Party. The Transvaal secretary of SABRA, W.E. Barker, one of Verwoerd's most devoted followers in the organisation, wrote a letter to the editor of *The Star* on 9 July 1958. In this letter, which the newspaper published the following day, Barker distanced himself from Du Plessis and emphasised that his opinions were not those of SABRA. He even denied that Du Plessis was in any way representative of "Afrikaner intellectuals".<sup>80</sup>

The prime minister, J.G. Strijdom, died shortly afterwards on 24 August 1958 and after an internal power struggle, Verwoerd emerged as his successor. Several months earlier, in June of the same year, Du Plessis had warned fellow "dopper", Jan de Klerk:

I want to put my considered opinion in writing ... that when Verwoerd becomes the leader of the National Party, he will wreck the party and at the same time destroy our chances to take over the leadership within a future federal republic of Southern Africa, despite the fact that I have great respect for him.<sup>81</sup>

After Verwoerd had been elected in a crucial vote, Du Plessis nevertheless wrote to congratulate him on his "well deserved promotion" to prime minister.<sup>82</sup> A few days later he assured Verwoerd that for the time being he would not make statements in the press, but he repeated his criticism of Verwoerd's policy. In his opinion this would lead to an "Afrikaner dictatorship in southern Africa". Furthermore, he added the following question: "With regard to the [black] 'congresses', how can you blame them for preferring their own rule to Afrikaner domination?" Verwoerd was clearly irritated and scribbled a note on the letter for his private secretary: "Just acknowledge receipt in my name. No commentary or spill of words! He tries again to begin correspondence but I will not do so."<sup>83</sup> Some four months later, on 18 December, Du Plessis wrote a letter to the new prime minister. He explained his concepts and said that he had attempted to initiate a conversation with the United Party and with Oppenheimer.<sup>84</sup> Apparently he wanted to prepare for a coalition with the NP. Such a move was completely out of the question for Verwoerd, who strongly rejected any outside interventions on questions of policy.

Du Plessis proved once more that he was not a politician and was certainly not out of touch with reality. He prophesied that a coalition of English and Afrikaans speaking nationalists including the United Party, was imminent. But a suitable leader

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1958 contained only apologies for the delay which was due to pressure of work. He did not comment on the topic. See p 148, Verwoerd – Du Plessis, 12 December 1958.

80. AFCH, PV 276/1/14/5/2, p 37, W.E. Barker letters to *The Star*, 9 and 10 July 1958. Obviously Barker's intervention had been cleared with Verwoerd, because a copy of his letter is in the papers of Verwoerd's private secretary, Barnard.
81. AFCH, PV 35/2/3/1/1/4, L.J. du Plessis – Jan de Klerk, 17 June 1958. Translated from the original Afrikaans.
82. AFCH, PV 93/1/11/3, L.J. du Plessis – H.F. Verwoerd, 3 September 1958.
83. AFCH, PV 93/3/1/25, p 27, L.J. du Plessis – H.F. Verwoerd, 18 August 1959. There is only an acknowledgment of receipt (p 28). Quotations translated from the original Afrikaans.
84. AFCH, PV 93/1/34/2, p 43, L.J. du Plessis – H.F. Verwoerd, 18 December 1958.

still had to be found.<sup>85</sup> He once again expressed his deep-seated aversion to party politics,<sup>86</sup> a view which had led him to join the extreme right wing in the 1940s. His efforts towards co-operation and conciliation became apparent even when he deviated to the right. He clearly wished to overcome institutionalised opposition. When he received no answer he repeated his wish to meet Verwoerd personally on 19 January 1959.<sup>87</sup> Du Plessis added a memorandum headed: “Possible fundamental traits in the following phase of our racial policy”, in which he gave his main ideas. He connected this with the demand that in order to create a favourable atmosphere, the Treason Trial had to be stopped. He explained his programme, which was already well known because of his newspaper articles, and underlined that

equal freedom for non-whites in Africa to whom we then can generally refer to as “Africans” must be proclaimed immediately as the racial policy for the future. It must be in combination with securing free, mostly white states with their own national unity, which we then can refer to as Afrikanerdom.<sup>88</sup>

Apparently he really believed that he could convert the new prime minister to his own point of view. Verwoerd’s treatment of critics in his own camp, e.g. in SABRA, should have made it clear to him that this was a forlorn hope.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, after their meeting in January 1959 Du Plessis wrote a postcard to Verwoerd on which he noted: “I am now even more convinced that you are not looking far enough into the future.”<sup>90</sup>

In his first speech as prime minister at the opening of parliament in early 1959, Verwoerd surprised even the followers of his own party because he announced a new departure, opening up the possibility for the bantustans to become independent states. This has been interpreted mainly as his reaction towards the independence movements in Africa and as propaganda to present apartheid as a modern and benevolent policy. This was certainly true, but in the context of Verwoerd’s conflict with SABRA and especially that with Du Plessis, in 1958 another interpretation seems possible. Perhaps Verwoerd wanted to beat the critics within his own political camp without changing anything substantial in the basic concept of his policy.<sup>91</sup> Verwoerd won back the initiative with his new bantustan policy when he apparently integrated the demands of his critics. In reality, he stubbornly stuck to his own policies.

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85. *Rand Daily Mail*, 9 March 1959.

86. See also *Cape Times*, 20 April 1959.

87. AFCH, PV 93/1/34/2, p 44, L.J. du Plessis – H.F. Verwoerd, 19 January 1959. There is a handwritten note on the letter: “Onderhoud gelewer [interview granted] op 20 January 1959” Du Plessis wanted to talk to Verwoerd not only about his political ideas, but also about the “further usefulness of Hans van Rensburg”.

88. AFCH, PV 93/1/34/2, Memorandum of 17 January 1959, p 2. Translated from the original Afrikaans. Regarding the Treason Trial he repeated his demand in a letter to Verwoerd: see AFCH, PV 93/3/1/25, L.J. du Plessis – H.F. Verwoerd, 18 August 1959, Postscript.

89. Verwoerd found an ally in Marius Jooste, who asked on 26 January for a meeting with Verwoerd to discuss urgent matters, i.e. Du Plessis’ “antics”: AFCH, PV 93/1/34/2, p 79, M.V. Jooste – H.F. Verwoerd, 26 January 1959.

90. AFCH, PV 93/1/31/1/35, Du Plessis’ postcard to Verwoerd, 21 January 1959. Translated from the original Afrikaans.

91. See also Scholtz, *Verwoerd, Deel 1*, p 299. He did not adopt any of Du Plessis’ proposals except bantustan independence. However, his pencil annotations make it clear that he followed Du Plessis’ public utterances with great awareness. The newspaper articles with Verwoerd’s notes can be found in AFCH, PV 93/1/31/1/35.



## The campaign against Du Plessis

In June 1958 Du Plessis was still confident enough to say: “Dr Verwoerd has not silenced me; only God almighty can do that”.<sup>92</sup> But in the following months he was to be disillusioned. Obviously under pressure from the prime minister, he resigned as chairman of the media enterprise *Dagbreek* in February 1959. But shortly afterwards he published a new series of articles in the *Cape Times*, which presented his political ideas to a wider audience. Again he emphasised that decolonisation could not be stopped and was actually a positive development. It was up to the whites of South Africa to react to this by co-operating with the movement. His latest idea was a pan-African “Monroe Doctrine”, following the recent ideological trends as formulated by the prime minister of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, and using them to South Africa’s advantage. Yet this idea was still motivated by a rejection of a multiracial society in South Africa, which Du Plessis saw as negative for everyone involved. At the same time, he insisted that Afrikaners and possibly other white nations which might yet be emerging, were inherently African and had nothing to do with colonialism. In his view, Africans included not only “so-called aboriginals of Africa”, but also “those peoples who have chosen Africa as their home”.<sup>93</sup> Since he foresaw decolonisation on a great scale in 1960, he regarded time as a critical factor, whereas Verwoerd was confident that time was on his side.<sup>94</sup> Du Plessis now advised that there also be dialogue with the “more extreme” black leaders, because he thought they could be convinced that a partition of South Africa was far preferable to a racial confrontation.<sup>95</sup>

Verwoerd became increasingly aggressive in his reaction to all who offered him their considered opinions, especially after some SABRA members held discussions with black leaders. Verwoerd maintained that holding such talks was tantamount to trespassing on government terrain and questioning its competence.<sup>96</sup> By this time, Du Plessis openly linked Verwoerd’s role in the draft constitution of 1940 with his current authoritarian approach. He maintained that it was Verwoerd who had written dictatorial concepts (derived from Salazar’s *estado novo*) into the draft constitution, and at the same time had accused Pirow and Van Rensburg of being sympathetic to national socialism.<sup>97</sup> In another article in the *Sunday Times* of 1 March 1959, Du Plessis went so far as to accuse the prime minister of “glaring political mistakes”.

Du Plessis supported racial segregation in tertiary education, claiming that Afrikaners had never felt welcome at English speaking universities and were glad to have their own institutions. On the basis of this he argued: “The same feeling must surely prevail among non-whites.”<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless, he rejected the dogmatic brand of segregation that inspired Verwoerd to ban mixed senates at the new colleges for

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92. *Sunday Express*, 22 June 1958.

93. *Cape Times*, 14 April 1959.

94. AFCH, PV 93/3/1/16, p 145ff. Du Plessis – Verwoerd, 24 September 1958. Du Plessis felt strongly that as prime minister, Verwoerd could not simply “leave the future to itself.”

95. *Cape Times*, 19 February 1959; the same article appeared in the *Rand Daily Mail* the next day.

96. *Sunday Times*, 1 March 1959.

97. *Cape Times*, 2 March 1959.

98. *Cape Argus*, 10 March 1959.

blacks, Indians and Coloureds. The same motives were responsible when Verwoerd rejected a federation of South Africa with the future bantustans – Du Plessis himself used the derogatory term “bantustan”. Du Plessis’ main point was that Verwoerd acted primarily in the interests of the NP and showed little concern for the welfare of the public at large. He even claimed that Verwoerd was not a true Afrikaner nationalist, because genuine nationalism could only develop if Afrikaans and English-speaking whites agreed to work together. Inevitably this unity would lead to discussions with the “real leaders of the non-whites”.<sup>99</sup> In a series of articles in English newspapers<sup>100</sup> during March and April 1959, Du Plessis repeated his fundamental theses again and again: Time was running out and the only solution was to be found in South Africa leading the anti-colonial movement. For the country itself, a solution could be found in territorial segregation combined with interstate co-operation and a super-ordinate federal system which he even labelled a “commonwealth”.<sup>101</sup> In addition, he praised the French model, the Communauté system that French president De Gaulle was initiating at the time. For Du Plessis, what appeared to be the way forward to a better future was in reality a desperate attempt by France to save its colonial African empire by making concessions to black politicians and forming them (together with France) into a comprehensive Communauté.<sup>102</sup> A precondition for progress in South Africa was to stop the discriminatory treatment of Africans, especially African diplomats.<sup>103</sup>

Verwoerd could not conceive of a middle course. He claimed that any deviation from his chosen path towards apartheid would inevitably lead to integration and the demise of white South Africans.<sup>104</sup> When, in mid-March 1959, the government declared that the bantustans would remain under white control, Du Plessis perceived this as unacceptable. He criticised “Dr Verwoerd’s irrational prejudice that whites and non-whites cannot combine separate development with a cooperative disposition over sovereign power.”<sup>105</sup> What he did not realise was that Verwoerd’s main enemy was precisely those African nationalists with whom Du Plessis wanted him to negotiate. In Verwoerd’s view, a South Africa under African nationalist rule was simply unworkable; black nationalism was impossible because Africans still clung to their tribal connections. If they overcame these divisions there would not be a cohesive nation; instead there would be cultural amorphism and chaos. Verwoerd fervently believed that “African nationalism is just an artificial product [devised] by some Westernised African intellectuals”,<sup>106</sup> a standpoint that Du Plessis in turn labelled as an example of Verwoerd’s outmoded thinking.

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99. *Sunday Times*, 1 March 1959.

100. He also offered this series to Afrikaans newspapers: J.C. Gericke Library, University of Stellenbosch, P.J. Cillie Collection, 220/K59(20), L.J. du Plessis – Editors of national newspapers, 14 February 1959. See also K59(20a), handwritten remark by Cillie: “Mr Weber, for commentary (or dealing with it) – I note that he will write again for the C[ape] T[imes]. PJC”.

101. *Cape Times*, 14 April 1959.

102. The best summary of his theses can be found in *The Cape Times*, 12 March 1959. On the French model see *Cape Times*, 17 March 1959 and *Rand Daily Mail*, 17 March 1959.

103. *Cape Times*, 7 April 1959.

104. A follower of the United Party came to the conclusion that the only consequence following from Du Plessis’ proposals seemed to be integration: *Cape Times*, 18 March 1959.

105. *Rand Daily Mail*, 27 March 1959.

106. *Cape Times*, 7 April 1959.

Du Plessis estimated the demographic development realistically when he warned that in 2000 the “Bantu” would be the dominating population group in South Africa. “But if we treat the Bantu properly, they will be civilised people, as we are. They will have a different cultural background but will have the same abilities and capabilities.”<sup>107</sup> Whereas Afrikaner nationalism and racism were closely linked for Verwoerd, Du Plessis increasingly separated nation from race.

Shortly afterwards, rumours were spread that Du Plessis’ expulsion from the National Party was imminent. He even had to face the possibility of being sacked as a member of the *Dagbreek* executive. In addition, his professorship was under threat because four of the twelve members of the University Council in Potchefstroom were government appointees.<sup>108</sup> On the following day, 10 March 1959, Du Plessis resigned as deputy chairman of the Potchefstroom branch of the NP. According to his own explanation, his resignation was for a purely local reason.<sup>109</sup> He was finally expelled from the National Party on 13 April 1959.<sup>110</sup> He claimed that this was in accordance with a decision taken by one or two party leaders at a secret session of the caucus without the necessary legitimisation at a party congress.<sup>111</sup> He also used the opportunity to clarify that the NP members involved were “aiding a coterie of self-opinionated politicians to bring the party to a premature fall and South Africa to the brink of ruin.”<sup>112</sup>

This incident once again provided ample evidence of the fundamental antagonism between Verwoerd and Du Plessis. This animosity arose because of their different mindsets and their divergent perceptions of the world. While Du Plessis strove to overcome borders, to conciliate in conflict and to reach a harmonious way of living together, Verwoerd thought in terms of irreconcilable differences. While Du Plessis stood for conciliation, Verwoerd polarised. It is even possible to identify in these two men the extremes of Afrikaner nationalism in the twentieth century: inclusion combined with conciliation, adjustment and dialogue on the one hand; exclusion, cultural nationalist self-definition and a pronounced sense of mission, on the other. Of course this pattern does not exclude overlapping or alterations in points of view. It is even tempting to say that Verwoerd stuck doggedly to the clear-cut categories of formal Aristotelian logic,<sup>113</sup> while Du Plessis was drawn to dialectical thinking, aiming at syntheses on a higher level.<sup>114</sup>

Each of Du Plessis’ proposals probably underlined and deepened the suspicions Verwoerd had of his opponent. Since the 1940s he had nurtured the suspicion that behind the curtain of cultural nationalism the professor was a *smelter*, or fusionist. Verwoerd wrote in this same vein about two recent articles by Du Plessis:

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107. *Cape Argus*, 10 March 1959.

108. *Cape Times*, 9 March 1959.

109. *Cape Times*, 10 March 1959.

110. *Cape Times*, 14 April 1959.

111. *Cape Times*, 20 April 1959.

112. *Cape Times*, 20 April 1959.

113. See AFCH, PV 93/1/33/4, for Verwoerd’s intensive study of logic and especially of Aristotelian syllogisms; notes and excerpts written at the time of his academic career in Stellenbosch.

114. He was even in favour of integrating the positive aspects of evolution theory and communism in the 1950s: Potgieter, *L.J. du Plessis as Denker*, p 154.

“His first letter was of the same *sapperige*<sup>115</sup> or fusionist colour as that *sapperige* article of his in *Koers* of February.”<sup>116</sup> As early as the 1930s, Du Plessis attempted to overcome the narrow restriction of the notion *volk*, referring instead to Afrikaans-speaking whites within the Broederbond.<sup>117</sup> In 1940 he also supported the efforts towards conciliation between the Hertzog and Malan factions,<sup>118</sup> and in 1954 he favoured the acceptance of English-speaking South Africans as part of the Afrikaner *volk*.<sup>119</sup> In addition, it has to be taken into account that Verwoerd thought in racial categories. He was convinced that blacks were less able to develop culturally to the same level as whites. This is why, for him, any form of overarching co-operation between the two racial groups was out of the question. Instead, he believed in white dominance and rule, although he used the euphemism “trusteeship” to gloss over this blatant discrimination. In contrast, from about the 1950s onwards, Du Plessis took the view that blacks were biologically and culturally as gifted and able as white South Africans.

It is notable that two other former stalwarts of the OB, both of them professors at Potchefstroom University, held similar views to those expressed by Du Plessis. The ethnologist J.H. Coetzee identified party politics as one of the main obstacles to a working order of racial separation.<sup>120</sup> An Afrikaans newspaper, *Die Vaderland*, published an article by Coetzee,<sup>121</sup> which argued in similar vein to Du Plessis. Shortly afterwards, the historian D.W. Kruger gave a comprehensive criticism of apartheid in an interview with the *Sunday Times*.<sup>122</sup> Reaction was not slow in coming. Before long, a sophisticated campaign in the NP press silenced them; no stone was left unturned, including letters to the newspaper editors and anonymous vituperations. University staff members, colleagues of the three professors, joined the chorus of criticism.<sup>123</sup> Ultimately the university Council, including registrar S. du Toit, an old friend of Verwoerd, distanced itself from the three dissident professors.<sup>124</sup> Jan de Klerk, the minister with the closest connections to Potchefstroom, used every means to enforce the party policy.<sup>125</sup> The threat of exclusion from the *volk* and ostracism by colleagues had the intended effect. In a letter to *Dagbreek en Sondagnuus*, Du Plessis humiliated himself by emphasising that for the most part the NP was moving in the right

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115. “Sapperig” implies leaning towards the views of Jan Smuts’ South African Party (SAP), which merged with Hertzog’s National Party in 1934 to form the United Party. Its followers were termed “smelters” (fusionists) by hardline nationalists.
116. AFCH, PV 93/1/56/1, H.F. Verwoerd – J.G. Strijdom, 2 September 1944; Scholtz, *Verwoerd, Deel I*, p 171. Translated from the original Afrikaans.
117. Stals, “Geschiedenis van die Afrikaner Broederbond”, pp 42–43.
118. Stals, “Geschiedenis van die Afrikaner Broederbond”, p. 110.
119. L.J. du Plessis “Volk en Nasie in Suid-Afrika”, *Koers*, 22, 1, 1954, pp 16–19, esp. p 17.
120. *Sunday Times*, 3 May 1959. Within OB circles there were a number of discussions about apartheid, which were surprisingly open and differentiated, but without any impact on the official policy of this organisation. See Marx, *Oxwagon Sentinel*, p 504.
121. *Die Vaderland*, 7 May 1959.
122. *Sunday Times*, 10 May 1959.
123. “Professors Bulldozed into Silence”, *Sunday Times*, 21 June 1959. Interestingly the three received support from another Potchefstroom professor with an OB past, Dirk van Rooy.
124. *Sunday Times*, 28 June 1959.
125. AFCH, PV 35/2/1/1/1, J. de Klerk – S. du Toit, 3 July 1958. In his opinion, Du Plessis’ recent statements made it obvious, “that for all practical purposes he is no asset to us any more”. In his answer of 26 July 1958, Du Toit invited De Klerk to a meeting in Potchefstroom which was only to be attended by members of the Gereformeerde Kerk.

direction. He even underlined his loyalty to the same NP that had expelled him a couple of weeks previously.<sup>126</sup>

### Du Plessis' final break with the Broederbond

Du Plessis tried to defend himself in a letter to the "highly esteemed Dr Verwoerd" on 8 July 1959. He pointed out that he felt no personal antipathy or lack of respect for Verwoerd, and that his "criticism was always focused on the tasks of the future rather than the recipes of today." At the same time he assured Verwoerd that he would not speak publicly about these matters any more. In return, Verwoerd assured him that since Strijdom's death his stance had been to "put all personal feelings aside and only live and work for the sake of the *volk*."<sup>127</sup> In this way Verwoerd styled himself as a selfless fighter for the well-being of the Afrikaners, stoically suffering vicious attacks launched against him. The game of inclusion in and exclusion from the *volk* was thus accentuated even further.

Only a year later, Du Plessis broke his silence and voiced his criticism of Verwoerd's politics. Now he proposed a large federation, even including Katanga and larger parts of Central and East Africa. He even went so far as to denounce exclusive Afrikaner nationalism and to aim at a comprehensive dispensation in which existing African monarchies would be included.<sup>128</sup>

On 14 May 1960, despite all the indignities and repudiation he had suffered, Du Plessis again addressed the prime minister directly. This was in the aftermath of Sharpeville and the first assassination attempt on Verwoerd. He sent him two memoranda, one he had written himself. The other had received broad support in Potchefstroom and was authored by S. du Toit.<sup>129</sup> It was a document that had originated from within the Broederbond cells in Potchefstroom. Du Plessis said that he did not have anything to do with it initially.<sup>130</sup> Nevertheless, it revealed that his ideas had apparently found wide acceptance after all, because one of the papers contained a number of demands, including the rescinding of the pass laws.<sup>131</sup> This apparent rapport between Du Plessis and his colleagues at Potchefstroom can only be explained by the general insecurity among Afrikaner nationalists in the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre and the expectation of new political developments.<sup>132</sup> Du Plessis' own, more comprehensive memorandum went beyond his well-known positions; he demanded that the banning of the ANC be rescinded and that there be a

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126. *Dagbreek en Sondagnuus*, 17 July 1959, letters to the editor.

127. AFCH, PV 93/3/1/24, p 81, Du Plessis – Verwoerd, 8 July 1959; and p 83, Verwoerd's reply of 6 August 1959. Quotations translated from the original Afrikaans.

128. *Sunday Times*, 17 July 1960.

129. AFCH, PV 93/3/1/28, p 23, Du Plessis – Verwoerd, 14 May 1960.

130. AB Archive, L.J. du Plessis – Chief Secretary, Broederbond, 16 July 1960, p 10.

131. AFCH, PV 93/3/1/28, p 24ff. "Ons Republiek en ons Rassebeleid", with handwritten corrections by Du Plessis. There are a number of question marks in the margin, which could possibly have been Verwoerd's, because those passages which clearly deviated from his political principles were marked.

132. D. and J. de Villiers, *Paul Sauer* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1977), pp 134–135. S.L. Barnard and A.H. Marais, *Die Verenigde Party: Die Groot Eksperiment* (Butterworth, Durban and Pretoria, 1982), pp 148ff. H. Kenney, *Architect of Apartheid: H. F. Verwoerd – An Appraisal* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg 1980), p 188; O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years*, pp 101ff.

transformation of potential insurgents into responsible representatives by the unbanning of the ANC, its leaders and similar black leaders. First of all there must be consultation with such trusted people instead of merely with real or pretended advocates of apartheid.<sup>133</sup>

The UR of the Broederbond under the chairmanship of P.J. Meyer, now Verwoerd's close confidant, discussed the memorandum in its meeting on 19 and 20 May 1960. It invited J.H. Coetzee and S. du Toit to attend a meeting on 4 June.<sup>134</sup> Meyer, certainly with the assent of Verwoerd, made sure that the UR gave the memorandum back to the Central Committee of the Broederbond in Potchefstroom, the coordinating body for the Potchefstroom cells. Providing a reason for this step, it said that there was apparently some "disunity of opinion on cardinal questions in this memorandum. Not even the Potchefstroom brothers have complete clarity."<sup>135</sup>

Du Plessis, now utterly disillusioned with the Broederbond, maintained, that in his naivety he had "hoped against hope that Dr Verwoerd would perhaps listen to sensible advice from good friends", although he didn't count himself among them any more. For this reason he had sent both memoranda to Verwoerd's wife shortly before her husband was discharged from hospital after the first assassination attempt in 1960. He made sure that Verwoerd was informed that one of the documents came from within the Broederbond. Later, Meyer as deputy chairman of the organisation, objected to this and accused him of proceeding in an inappropriate manner.<sup>136</sup> However, Mrs Verwoerd told him that her husband planned to "invite these Potchefstroom friends to visit him for a discussion of the proposals submitted to him."<sup>137</sup> Unfortunately the outcome of these conversations was not documented, but we do know that they did not bring about any significant change in government policies. On the contrary they contributed to Du Plessis' resignation from the Broederbond. In a long letter to the chief secretary of the organisation, dated 16 July 1960, he named the development of the Broederbond as the reason for his resignation. He alleged that the organisation had been dominated by leaders of the Purified National Party, i.e. a sectional group of politicians and church people, for a considerable time. He observed that wonderful opportunities for the advancement of Afrikanerdom had been wasted because of the

narrow-mindedness and imperiousness of the self-styled leaders of the *volk*, who are unable to propose any heroic vision because [they claim] the *volk* is not mature enough for it. But at the same time they try to annihilate anybody who dares to prepare the *volk* for this maturity.<sup>138</sup>

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133. AFCH, PV 93/3/1/28, p 17ff., 'n Toegewyde tydswoord namens die kultureel-georganiseerde Afrikanerdom van Potchefstroom aan sy staatkundige leier in hierdie roepingswanger tydsgewrig by geleentheid van sy beloftevolle herstel uit doodsgevaar, p. 6. Quotation translated from the original Afrikaans.
  134. AB Archive, 2/3/39, UR meeting 19/20 May 1960, Agenda no. 32, p 10. The memorandum, dated 13 May 1960, is an appendix to the minutes of the meeting.
  135. AB Archive, 2/3/39, Dagbestuur 4 June 1960, Agenda no. 10, pp 3–4 Translated from the original Afrikaans.
  136. AB Archive, L.J. du Plessis – Chief Secretary, Broederbond, 16 July 1960, p 10.
  137. AFCH, PV 93/3/1/28, pp 29–30, Mrs Verwoerd – L.J. du Plessis, 23 May 1960. Translated from the original Afrikaans.
  138. AB Archive, L.J. du Plessis – Chief Secretary, Broederbond, 16 July 1960. Translated from the original Afrikaans.

Du Plessis went on to claim that the current chairman (H.B. Thom) as well as Meyer and Pauw, prevented Potchefstroom and SABRA from formulating constructive criticism. As far as party leaders were concerned, wrote Du Plessis:

The former prime minister told church leaders that they had to leave education alone because it is the politicians' business. And the present prime minister spoke in the same vein to business representatives with respect to economics. In my opinion, this is the very National Socialism for which the OB used to be blamed.<sup>139</sup>

It was his view that the Broederbond's calling was "to take the lead in giving guidance to the *volk*, sometimes even against the ideas of politicians". He saw this as his task in the remaining decade of his life. Since the Broederbond objected to his stance and had consistently shown this to be so, he saw no possibility of remaining a member of the organisation. He had clashed with party leaders on a number of occasions, the most recent being with Verwoerd, "because his republicanism is one-sided and his apartheid a fraud". This letter, he wrote, constituted his final break with Verwoerd and the Broederbond, because the organisation had become "irrevocably alienated from its own constitution since the recent chairmanship of the late friend Joon".<sup>140</sup>

### The demise of a dissident

In his letter of resignation from the Broederbond, Du Plessis also referred to rumours "about my private life" and his eccentricities that were intentionally spread by "so-called circles of friends from Cape Town, Pretoria, Johannesburg, Bloemfontein and even Potchefstroom".<sup>141</sup> During the following years Du Plessis wrote another two letters to Verwoerd urging political rights for the urban black population. Verwoerd rejected these proposals in his typical manner, when he explained that such concessions would only open the door to black majority rule.<sup>142</sup>

Two different understandings of politics clashed head-on in the deliberations of the NP. The prime minister quarrelled with the intellectuals of SABRA, the churchmen and the academics in the late 1950s. The NP was eager to ensure that it closed ranks and there be discipline amongst its members and functionaries. Meanwhile, Verwoerd refused dialogue with those who were critical of his policy; he was only prepared to listen to criticism if it referred to minor details and did not touch his basic principles. Other Afrikaner nationalists, however, were interested in discussions with critics and adversaries. They tried to break out of isolation and to come to some sort of understanding from their own position as defenders of apartheid and Afrikaner nationalism. These different tactics became evident, when *Die Transvaler*, a newspaper where Verwoerd had once worked as an editor and which he

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139. L.J. du Plessis – Chief Secretary, Broederbond, 16 July 1960. Translated from the original Afrikaans.

140. L.J. du Plessis – Chief Secretary, Broederbond, 16 July 1960, p 11. Translated from the original Afrikaans.

141. L.J. du Plessis – Chief Secretary, Broederbond, 16 July 1960, p 11. Translated from the original Afrikaans.

142. AFCH, PV 93/1/30/1/14, L.J. du Plessis – H.F. Verwoerd, 24 January 1962; Verwoerd's reply on 14 February 1962; AFCH, PV 93/1/30/1/13, L.J. du Plessis – H.F. Verwoerd, 23 September 1961; Verwoerd's reply on 3 October 1961.

still dominated, flatly refused dialogue with *Trouw*, a Dutch paper. *Trouw* suggested that they exchange pages to inform their respective readers about different ways of thinking in South Africa and the Netherlands. *Die Burger*, on the other hand, immediately agreed to the exchange and began an intensive albeit strained dialogue with its Dutch counterpart.<sup>143</sup>

No other Afrikaner nationalist or advocate of apartheid went as far as Du Plessis did. The impulse that had previously driven him into anti-parliamentary rightwing extremism was the same that now motivated him to promote the unquestioned right to self-determination of other South African population groups. This impulse followed the Calvinist doctrine of justification. In 1960, the man who had once shown some questionable signs of sympathy for National Socialism was now, under the influence of his rigorous Calvinist belief, impelled to join the Progressive Party. Although no documents are available on his motivation to take this step, he was probably driven by his conviction that time was running out for white South Africans. The fact that he joined the Progressive Party certainly does not imply that he became a staunch liberal advocate of parliamentary democracy. His main motive in joining the Opposition was his conviction that justice was more important than political programmes. When he realised that apartheid as the NP intended it to be, would not be a justifiable order, he abandoned this policy.

Du Plessis was successfully ostracised by his political opponents and soon became a lonely man. He never recovered fully from the brain surgery he had in 1963 and after his death in 1968, he was soon forgotten by the wider public.<sup>144</sup> Interestingly, a number of his ideas later became reality, although no reference was ever made to his contribution or credit accorded to him. Examples are Vorster's policy of detente and Pik Botha's initiatives during the 1980s; both were based on the insight that South Africa had to position itself as an African state in Africa. P.W. Botha's tri-cameral parliament and his concept of a "constellation of states" look very much as if they were inspired by Du Plessis. But none of these politicians was ever prepared to go as far as the professor from Potchefstroom who demanded an end to the suppression of the black majority. Only F.W. de Klerk's failed attempt to secure group rights within a democratic constitution would have found Du Plessis' approval. It is highly doubtful whether Du Plessis's vision of a "just apartheid" could ever have been a realistic alternative. The ANC as an African nationalist organisation certainly would have rejected it. In the aftermath of the banning of the ANC and the Rivonia Trial, political polarisation escalated to the extent that Du Plessis' proposals for a solution had no chance of acceptance. After the fall of apartheid, at least he was remembered by some as one of a few independent intellectuals.<sup>145</sup>

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143. H.O. Terblanche, *Nederland en die Afrikaner: Gesprek oor Apartheid* (University of Port Elizabeth, Research publication C30, Port Elizabeth, 1998).

144. Only after his death in 1970, was Du Plessis' criticism of apartheid appreciated. See. E. van Eeden, "Die 'Stem van Potchefstroom' in die Samelewing", in E. van Eeden (ed), "*In U Lig: Die PU vir CHO van Selfstandigwording tot Samesmelting, 1951–2004*" (North-West University, Potchefstroom, 2005), pp 505–544, esp. pp 510, 516.

145. Hennie Serfontein, a journalist who published a number of influential articles on the Broederbond during the 1960s wrote about him in 1996: "The former Broederbond chairperson, LJ du Plessis, was the father figure of this intellectual revolt against the Verwoerd tyranny and fundamental aspects of apartheid. While small numbers of individuals and study groups only occasionally came out in open criticism, it was Du Plessis who had the courage on several occasions to publicly clash head-on with Verwoerd and to bluntly tell him about the



During the 1950s, Du Plessis was given no opportunity at all to make his voice heard; nor was he taken seriously by the emerging Afrikaner nationalist establishment. Securing its hold on power clearly took priority over intellectual experiments. When Du Plessis – after a tortuous process of reflection – came to the conclusion that apartheid as envisaged and practised by the NP (and Verwoerd in particular) would never be justifiable, it was his Calvinist conviction that led him finally to give up on apartheid and to advocate the right to self-determination.

### **Abstract**

This article analyses the conflict in the 1950s between L.J. Du Plessis of Potchefstroom University and the South African prime minister, Hendrik Verwoerd. The issue was whether apartheid, in the way Verwoerd implemented it, was justifiable. Du Plessis came to the conclusion that apartheid would only be justifiable if it gave Africans a chance to realise their self-determination. Driven by his Calvinist convictions and inspired by the decolonisation process on the African continent, he argued for negotiations with South Africa's black political leaders, including those of the ANC. The Calvinist doctrine of justification explains why Du Plessis, who was a member of the Ossewabrandwag Grootraad during the 1940s, advocated dialogue with Africans. As a fervent cultural nationalist he believed in communities; he rejected individualism and parliamentary democracy. But when his conviction grew that time was running out for white South Africans, he was prepared to give up on apartheid as a policy. The National Party and Verwoerd rejected his proposals out of hand. Du Plessis was ostracised and expelled from the party. In the end, he became disillusioned and decided to resign from the Afrikaner Broederbond, whose chairman he had once been.

### **Opsomming**

#### **Van trusteeskap tot selfbeskikking: L.J. du Plessis se apartheidsdenke en sy botsing met H.F. Verwoerd**

Hierdie artikel ontleed die botsing tussen L.J. du Plessis van die Universiteit van Potchefstroom en Hendrik Verwoerd, die Suid-Afrikaanse eerste minister, gedurende die 1950's. Die botsing het gehandel oor die kwessie of apartheid, soos dit deur Verwoerd toegepas is, regverdigbaar was. Du Plessis het tot die slotsom gekom dat apartheid net regverdigbaar sou wees as dit aan swartes 'n ware geleentheid vir selfbeskikking sou bied. Gedrewe deur sy Calvinistiese oortuiginge en besiel deur die proses van dekolonisasie in Afrika, het hy aangedring op onderhandelinge met die politieke leiers van swart Suid-Afrika, insluitend dié van die ANC. Die Calvinistiese leerstelling van regverdiging verduidelik waarom Du Plessis as 'n lid van die Ossewabrandwag se Grootraad gedurende die 1940's, 'n voorstander vir gesprekvoering met swartes was. As 'n vurige kulturele nasionalis, het hy in gemeenskappe geglo; hy het individualisme en parlementêre demokrasie verwerp. Sy groeiende kommer oor die toekoms van die Afrikaner het tot gevolg gehad dat hy

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dangers of apartheid. He did this for the sake of the future survival of the Afrikaner. Many believe that if ever there was a man who today deserves a monument, it is L.J. du Plessis". H. Serfontein, "Courageous 'Verligtes'", *New Nation*, 16 February 1996.

bereid was om die apartheidsbeleid op te offer. Die Nasionale Party en Verwoerd het sy voorstelle verwerp. Du Plessis is verstoot en uit die party gesluit. Oplaas het hy as 'n teleurgestelde uit die Afrikaner Broederbond, waarvan hy eens voorsitter was, bedank.

**Key words**

African independence; Afrikaner Broederbond; Afrikaner nationalism; apartheid; Calvinism; criticism of apartheid; cultural nationalism; H.F. Verwoerd; intellectual history; L.J. du Plessis; National Party; Ossewabrandwag; ostracism; parliamentary democracy; political dissent; Potchefstroom University.

**Slutelwoorde**

Afrikaner Broederbond; Afrikanernasionalisme; apartheid; Calvinisme; H.F. Verwoerd; intellektuele geskiedenis; kritiek op apartheid; kulturele nasionalisme; L.J. du Plessis; Nasionale Party; onafhanklikeidsbeweging in Afrika; Ossewabrandwag; parlementêre demokrasie; politieke tweespalt; Universiteit van Potchefstroom; verstoting.